

“Unitatis redintegratio: benchmark or high-water mark?”

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What does it say?

On November 21, 1964, Pope Paul VI and the Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council declared that the restoration of unity is one of the principal concerns of the Church (UR,1). *“Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only,”* and *“division contradicts the will of God, scandalizes the world and damages her mission to preach the one Gospel of Jesus Christ.”* It was the culmination of Pope John XXIII’s January, 1959 announcement that he intended to convoke an Ecumenical Council *“for the whole Church, not only for the spiritual good and joy of the Christian people but also to invite the separated Communities to seek again that unity for which so many souls are longing in these days throughout the world.”*

From the Decree: *“Taking part in this movement, which is called ecumenical, are those who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. They do this not merely as individuals but as members of the corporate groups in which they have heard the Gospel, and which each regards as his Church and indeed, God’s. And yet, almost everyone, though in different ways, longs for the one visible Church of God...”* (UR,1).

The Decree defines Catholic principles of ecumenism. Jesus’ own prayer to the Father, (in which we place all our hope for prayers answered) is *“That they might be one in us that the world might believe”* (Jn 17). The separations that exist, a separation which the Decree calls *“the sin of separation,”* cannot be blamed on those who are born and brought up in a communion (though imperfect) by Baptism (UR,3). *“The Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affection as brothers.”* Even so, they are incorporated into Christ. This was news to a lot of the Church of 1964.

It goes further: *“Some, even very many, of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements. All of these, which come from Christ and lead back to him, belong by right to the one Church of Christ”* (UR,3). *“...the separated churches “have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.”*

“The sacred Council exhorts, therefore, all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of Ecumenism”, (UR,4) which follows four paths: 1) dialogue between competent experts; 2) more intensive cooperation serving the common good; 3) common prayer where permitted; and 4) embracing the task of renewal and reform. Our primary duty is to have our own house in order first, to seek our own renewal, *“to make a careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be renewed and done..., in order that its life may bear witness more clearly and faithfully to the teachings and institutions which have been handed down from Christ through the Apostles.”*

The Decree explains that all of us, Catholic and non-Catholic, fail to live by all means of truth and grace and have much work to do in order to be purified, renewed. Whatever has caused division to arise and continue—pride, ambition, impatience, rash judgment, calumny and hypocrisy, unwillingness to forget, mistrust, abuses of authority, exploitation of ignorance—all this shapes the heritage of the past. Paulist Father Tom Stransky of the original Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, in his 1965 Commentary on the Decree, says that

“What is remarkable in the Decree is the frank and humble admission that the Roman Catholic Church shares the responsibility of the scandal and for the damage caused to the preaching of the Gospel to every creature (1). There is no claim that only the ‘Others’ were and are at fault. Basically, both sides are to blame.”

The Decree continues that *“we must gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments for our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brethren. It is right and salutary to recognize the riches of Christ and the virtuous works in the lives of others who are bearing witness to Christ, sometimes even to the shedding of their blood.”*

The Council Fathers add that anything brought about by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our baptized, though non-Catholic brothers and sisters can contribute to our own edification. Whatever is truly Christian is never contrary to the faith.

This duty of restoring unity extends to everyone. The fact of our concern is already a bond that links us together (UR,5).

Christ summons the Church to *continual reformation!*

We must admit historic and current *“deficiencies in moral conduct or Church discipline, or even the way that Church teaching has been formulated,”* but all must carefully distinguish these from the deposit of faith itself. This has never been clearer than in the wake of scandals which have so damaged the face of the Church for the past ten years.

Therefore there can be no ecumenism worthy of name without interior conversion: *“For it is from newness of attitudes of mind, from self-denial and unstinted love, that desires of unity take their rise and develop in a mature way. We should therefore pray to the Holy Spirit for the grace to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others and to have an attitude of brotherly generosity toward them”* (UR,7).

“This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name, “spiritual ecumenism” (UR,8).

Cardinal Walter Kasper, in his 2004 article, *“Unitatis redintegratio: A New Interpretation After 40 Years,”* says that

“in the situation of division, the Catholic Church cannot fully and concretely develop her own catholicity (UR 4, Ut unum sint 14). The Church therefore needs purification and renewal and must ceaselessly take the way of penance” (Lumen gentium 8, UR 3, UUS 34, 83).

“This self-critical and penitential vision is the basis of the progress of the ecumenical movement (UR 5-12). It included conversion and renewal, without which there can be no ecumenism or dialogue, because ecumenism, rather than an exchange of ideas, is an exchange of gifts.”

The Council offers a warning against indiscriminate worship in common, encouraging us to grow in our familiarity with each other—through study meetings always holding the value of fidelity to truth and the spirit of good will as guiding principles. Theology and history must be taught “with due regard for the ecumenical point of view” (UR,10), for “...it is upon the formation which priests receive that so largely depends the necessary instruction and spiritual formation of the faithful and of religious.”

Dialogue, undertaken, must be faithful to authentic teaching and not obscure the purity of Catholic doctrine, searching the divine Mysteries with love for the truth, with charity, and with humility, observing the hierarchy of truths as understood in Catholic doctrine. It should also do everything it can “to relieve the afflictions of the times such as famine, natural disasters, illiteracy and poverty, lack of housing and the unequal distribution of wealth” (UR,12).

The *Decree* then discusses the two principal types of division which occur in the Church: the dissolving of the ecclesiastical communion between the Eastern Patriarchates and the Roman See, and those divisions following the Reformation.

Differences East to West are as original as the different apostles who founded them, whose heritages handed down were received differently and in different forms, and grew in the context of different cultures. We are still joined “in closest intimacy” by the possession of true sacraments and the rich diversity of spiritual traditions which “only add to the Church’s beauty and contribute greatly to carrying out her mission” (UR,16). Differences in theological expressions of doctrine are often to be considered complementary rather than conflicting. “It is the Council’s urgent desire that every effort should be made toward the gradual realization of this unity in the various organizations and living activities of the Church” (UR,18), especially by prayer and fraternal dialogue on doctrine and pressing pastoral problems of our time.

The Reformation churches are divided from us more along the lines of questions concerning faith and church order. We are connected by earlier centuries of ecclesiastical communion but now face “weighty differences not only of a historical, sociological, psychological and cultural character, but especially in the interpretation of revealed truth” (UR,19). Thankfully, Christ is commonly understood as source and center of ecclesiastical communion, but there are rendered different variations in the interpretation of Sacred Scripture.

A shared Baptism constitutes the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who through it are reborn, but it is, “of itself, only a beginning, a point of departure, directed toward the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ” (UR,22). Cardinal Kasper, in the same article, writes: “On the basis of one common Baptism, ecumenism goes far beyond mere benevolence and simple friendship: it is not a form of ecclesial diplomacy but has an ontological foundation and an ontological depth; it is an event of the Spirit.”

“Baptism is evidently only the point of departure and the basis of unity (UR, 22). Incorporation into the Church reaches its fullness with the Eucharist, which is the source, fulcrum and summit of Christian and ecclesial life.”

We are united by our understanding of the Christian way of life, the hearing of the Word, common elements of worship and a lively sense of justice and a true charity toward others. As to the language of “membership,” “incorporation,” or “communion,” the continued reference to “separated from complete communion” implies that what is “incomplete” is still a part of communion; what is “imperfect” still in some way participates in the *perfect*.

How did it play out? Was it a benchmark or a high-water mark?

Having quickly summarized the text, now I’d like to offer some observations and corresponding reflections from the perspective of a pastor nearly 50 years later.

Soon after the *Decree on Ecumenism*, in December 1965, a joint Catholic-Orthodox declaration was read simultaneously in Rome and Istanbul by Paul VI and Athenagoras I of Constantinople. They withdrew the mutual excommunications of 1054. I try to imagine now the headiness of this moment. A little more than a year before this date, the landslide confirmation of a new ecumenical spirit in the Church probably shocked the Church/world even more. From our perspective the modern day is defined by “too-close-to-count” elections in which no clear mandate is truly achieved. A people is only defined as equally divided by their elections. Moral truths are misunderstood as popular issues and determined by hairline majorities. For us, it is nearly impossible to comprehend the impact of a vote that could have resulted in 2,137 Bishops in favor, and only 11 opposed, to a new mandate for dialogue toward unity. Considering the unconventional and relative obscurity of the process which brought forth this *aggiornamento*, it continues to be a source of hope to me, inspiring me as a pastor who

works for church unity to consider that seemingly impossible goals are indeed possible when the right combination of hearts and the Holy Spirit collide. But the simplest, most obvious solutions are usually the most difficult to bring to birth, and require courageous souls to put heart-to pen-to paper.

The Gospel called and humility to the will of God responded, forming the basis of the words of the Declaration of 1965. One can only presume that this was intended by Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I to be the example for the process that the Church was to follow after the Council. They declared that “they regretted the offensive words, the reproaches without foundation, and the reprehensible gestures which, on both sides, have marked or accompanied the sad events of this period.” They likewise regretted and removed “both from memory and from the midst of the Church the sentences of excommunication which followed these events, the memory of which has influenced actions up to our day and has hindered closer relations in charity;” and they committed these excommunications “to oblivion.” Finally, they deplored the events which, because of misunderstanding and mutual lack of trust—eventually led to the rupture of ecclesiastical communion.

They believed that through the action of the Holy Spirit those differences would be overcome through cleansing of hearts, through regret for historical wrongs, and through a determination to arrive at a common understanding and expression of the faith of the Apostles and its demands.

Assuming that this statement was to be the appropriate model which the Church would follow in action, the world is still left in the question, as remarkable as this is, how will we overcome *ourselves* to allow the Holy Spirit to answer this prayer Christ himself prayed in which we place our hope entirely?

When I was in the seminary we studied the then-ten year-old groundbreaking WCC Faith and Order Paper, “*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*” of 1982. BEM explored growing agreement in fundamental areas of the churches’ faith and life. Many of the mutual recognitions and full communion agreements among Christian communities which have been acknowledged since find their source in this document. At that time this study opportunity was offered to only four seminarians each year in an elective class called “Interseminary Seminar.” Our task was to write a paper based on the document that would be presented to seminarians of seven or eight institutions in eastern Pennsylvania. We Catholics wrote out papers on sacraments and presented them to our dialogue partners who did not have context nor vocabulary to understand what we were speaking about. Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry were not otherwise considered in themselves; seminarians from other seminaries wrote their papers on women in ministry and how our communion calls us to address ecological issues. Two papers on BEM were presented to us which troubled me deeply on the topics of how there can be no such thing as an absolute truth, and how no deed can be completely good, that it would always have some bad effect on someone, somewhere. Already ten years after its publication at that time, I wondered how much impact BEM was having on people in formation; it is time to study it again.

Now, twenty years later, we look back to the 1993 *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms in the Practice of Ecumenism*, an official promulgation of the PCPCU completing the work of the 1967 document *Ad Totam Ecclesiam*, governing the praxis that is appropriate in response to the exhortations of the Council. It is a document that provides clear direction today, though within a church that is largely unaware of it. Most priests I’ve asked haven’t heard of it, or have forgotten it.

Pope John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical “*Ut Unum Sint*” took up again the two-fold discussion of division between the churches. East to West, he states that the Church of Jesus Christ must breathe with her two lungs,

that the unity of these churches is essential, as well as further dialogue and unity with the Protestant Churches of the Reformation. He showed that the Roman Catholic Church is officially moved to unity.

Dialogue reached another high point in 1999 with the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, in which the underlying conflict over the nature of justification which fueled the ideological base of the Protestant Reformation was essentially resolved. This time, the PCPCU and the Lutheran World Federation withdrew excommunications and condemnations set forth in the Council of Trent and the Lutheran Confessions nearly 500 years before.

Despite such remarkable advances—if you think about it, *really* remarkable advances which had their beginning with the *Decree on Ecumenism*—it still seems that people today are more likely to hold onto the caricature of the Council without any real knowledge of what the documents said. Many times I have taught classes on doctrine in my parish and I will ask the hundred or so people who are sitting in the church how many have actually read the texts of Vatican II? Maybe two people will raise their hands. Despite this, everyone has formed an opinion.

Like the “nun stories” from elementary school that everyone loves to tell—whether they had women religious or not—the message of Vatican II has been hijacked by various unfortunate events in which the “Spirit of Vatican II” was claimed as the reason, such as stories of reckless liturgical innovations and the “remodeling” of churches. From my own experience as a child I remember the day my family visited the Cathedral in Kansas City, Missouri when, all of a sudden, the plaster of the beautiful columns which marched up the nave had been stripped away leaving the bare steel beams beneath. Old churches’ architectural decoration and paintings all over town disappeared, without any explanation that we were aware of. “It’s Vatican II,” they said. I remember today the feeling of bewilderment. Though I can understand the thinking behind it today, and whether one agrees or

not, what stays in my mind most is the feeling of violation that it left with my family, and we only became more “conservative” as a result. “Conservative” to me, as a child, meant “in opposition to Vatican II.” I arrived at the seminary twenty years later, I recall, still with a chip on my shoulder and a lack of trust in the Church. Thankfully, I was met with a very faithful faculty who loved the Church, who inspired me to read the documents of Vatican II and see what was truly there. They changed my life.

People today *want* to look and find what is doubtful about the Church, suspicious. It is the impression, perhaps true, that too many things were done by people who invented new practices with no depth of Tradition to back them up, which often contradicted the actual texts.

The ecumenical movement has suffered similar effects. It has seemed to some the last liberal comfort zone for folks who like to get together and complain about all that is wrong with the Church. When I inherited our diocesan Commission of Parish Ecumenical and Interreligious Representatives (PEIRs), it seemed more a group of people who sought unity for unity’s sake, despite the admonitions of the Church, who (wink) just wanted to keep control of things. More of a “better to ask pardon later than permission before” kind of an attitude. The authenticity of Catholic teaching was not necessarily the starting point, and the result could only be a watered-down version of real relationship, people not being who they really were for the sake of exchange. Over years, everywhere, suspicion for the ecumenical movement grew. We had reached a point where any pastors didn’t even know who their representative was, it was someone appointed years ago by some other pastor, so there was not a level of trust, or entrustment, for the laity to speak on behalf of the local church. At my bishop’s recommendation, we let the program hibernate for a few years, then reconstituted membership with new recommendations of pastors.

The men’s group in a parish wants to host a discussion of Vatican II based on an article in a book review journal, an essay titled “Vatican II at 50.” It followed, in this journal, after an article titled “In Defense of GOP Extremism.” It reminds me of myself years ago. The article gives a fairly balanced argument of how the Second Vatican Council (and a few influential radicals) undermined a perfectly healthy Church, disrupted the deep-rooted Latin Mass and the popular devotions which fed the multitudes who packed the churches of the 40s and 50s, and replaced Church doctrine with a Marxist agenda. I asked if the group had considered using the actual texts of Vatican II as basis for discussion; it had not been considered.

The article developed one salient argument. Although it, in no way, gave due credit to Pope Paul VI for his contribution, it clearly considered that the schism between doctrine and praxis in the modern Church is not due to a lack of effort on the part of both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI in speaking of a hermeneutic of continuity:

“The years between the end of the Second Vatican Council and the election of Pope John Paul II were not an easy time for the West in general. Perhaps, given the times, the turmoil in the Catholic Church would have been almost as great if the Council had never taken place. But ... John Paul II started a “Catholic restoration.” The pope’s restoration, however, was not a return to the status quo ante. Instead, he and his successor initiated a truer reading of what the Council had intended: renewal, not rupture; a deeper, more sophisticated appreciation of the Catholic tradition, not haphazard abandonment.”

Blessed John Paul II began his papacy immediately, without pause, continuing the work of Pope Paul VI in implementing the Council. Following his synod of bishops in 1985, on the 20th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council’s conclusion, he began to operate on the world stage like no pope in history had ever done. Was this a truer vision sought by the Council, a renewal of Catholicism in a modern context?

Ut Unum Sint didn't happen in a vacuum. The 1995 document came in a string of encyclicals which defined Catholicism in the modern age. *Evangelium vitae* (1995) made a moral case for Catholic thought in medical ethics. The knowability of truth (1993, *Veritatis splendor*), and the compatibility of faith and reason (*Fides et ratio*, 1998) were values which *needed* restatement in the public square. In this context, ecumenism became a fundamental part of the basic truths of faith, undeniably Catholic and essential to the identity of the Church and her mission.

Still, it seems the growing tendency among many in our Church today, including clergy, to be skeptical of liturgical renewal, Conferences of Bishops, and ecumenical activity. As Dr. Catherine Clifford said in a recent paper presented at Georgetown University on the Identity of the Church and Vatican II, with the Second Vatican Council we discovered a new value of *dialogue*, which replaced the monologue of the Church, always speaking *at* the people. Suddenly there was an awareness of the *other*, someone to enter into relationship *with*, to *collaborate with*. Lay people had an identity after all, and were worthy of conversation. So, too, were those whose practice kept them outside communion, though their creed was the same. Sadly, today, it seems that *values* of Vatican II may be discounted wholesale and not deemed as trustworthy among the more recently ordained. One of the values that may well go with the rest is the spirit of ecumenism.

CADEIO has partnered with the SEIA / USCCB this past fall to circulate a survey among deans and rectors of seminaries administered by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) to measure the level of integration of ecumenical and interreligious values into their academic and formation programs. We expect results in the very soon.

I recently had a bit of an epiphany of my own, two years after the renovation of our church. The sculptor who created our beautiful new sculptures, which includes a realist life-sized crucifixion of Je-

sus, Mary and John, stopped me in church one day and spoke of how grateful he was to be a part of our project. He said it was because our vision was one of integrity: we had a 70s church that needed a lot of work. We moved forward with what was the best "work of our hands" in art and integrity of materials. He said that we were able to accomplish a sacred space that was truly authentic, *not a revival for the sake of revival*, but a living holy place in which everything was suited for the living prayer and worship of a living community. The new so-called "beauty movement," so popular in many Church circles today, this movement which calls from the past, I realized, had no more integrity or life than the stripped steel beams where plaster had been in my Cathedral as a child. One is putting a new patch on an old wine-skin, the other is using an old skin for new wine.

So *Unitatis redintegratio*, and liturgical life, and ecumenism challenge us to consider a modern understanding of our identity. Are we who we are, or are we to be who they were? How does one justify modern lighting and sound, heating and air conditioning, in spaces that seek to recreate an experience hundreds of years old? Tradition can't be something we keep in a museum, but it has to live. We were in the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Troyes, France, for the 100th anniversary of the death of the now beatified Fr. Louis Brisson, founder of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, and we experienced first-hand how cold an 800 year-old Gothic cathedral can be! Maybe the coldest experience of my life. For this student of art and architecture, the circa-1200 environment-classroom's integrity came to life when the living liturgy met with the museum. It was a coming to life. There was something mystical about it, but only because it was centuries in the making. What the *Decree on Ecumenism* demands here is not the defacing of an existing structure like the Cathedral in Kansas City to conform to a renewal, nor revival for the sake of revival, but establishing a new expression, in reverence to the past, of who we know ourselves to be *today*. It is a present that comes out of the past, moving forward; not a past that comes out of the present. There is a wide gap between renewal and revival.

That Gothic Cathedral was absolutely, scandalously modern when it was built, the latest technology of engineering and light and structural loads, it featured the latest developments in art. Come to think of it, the Lord's Prayer wasn't a text Jesus had memorized and recited, it was a movement of his heart and mind to the Father, a perfect expression of what was going on inside him at that moment. We have memorized it and rattled it off ever since. Beethoven improvised the most intricate compositions on the spur of the moment and there was a flock of people standing by trying to trap his genius on paper with complicated notations of notes, rests and dynamics. Was the note dotted this way, or that? And how faithfully the world would follow for the rest of history trying to recreate exactly that moment's performance!

Ecumenism will succeed because of the genius of the moment, not the exactitude of analysis but due to our faithfulness to whom God calls us to be as well as who we are. There is much to be said that the Holy Spirit, who is the author of unity, will be the one who makes the move. We will be privileged witnesses, God willing, on that day that the symphony begins.

I would say, then, to the question of whether *Unitatis redintegratio* is a benchmark or a high-water mark, I would say it is neither. It is an awakening to who we are together. Well, the awakening took place long ago in our hearts but Mother Church was never historically free enough from conflict and the work of defending the faith over the past five centuries—and the fear of being confused with her so-called separated brethren—to be able to speak simply and positively about who she herself is. And so with *Unitatis redintegratio* it officially begins.

You might call the *Decree* something of a baptism in itself.

What must we do to make sure it is at least a benchmark?

1. We must decide we are not too busy, and persevere.

I'm pastor of St. Mary parish in historic Fredericksburg, Virginia, with about 15,000 registered parishioners. I would not be able to do this additional work if it were not for the sincere support of my bishop, the help of a dedicated parish staff member and two parochial vicars who cover the confessions and hospital calls when I'm often engaged in extra-parochial activities. Most of us who do this work are doing it as an extra-parochial or extracurricular activity. Most priests don't have the luxury of so heavy a workload that they can afford or qualify for additional staff and necessary budgets.

So often I am asked why I stick with the meetings, the endless meetings and workshops and more meetings. It is because I believe, and I know so many of you who also believe. We believe that it is God's will that we love because he loves. He desires the restoration of his creation as one. If we love, then we desire unity. A desire for unity without first loving your brother and sister is ingenuine. And we know that such a monumental task of full visible communion is more than any of us, even all of us, can accomplish, only God knows the day and the hour. Our job is simply to maintain relationships among ecumenical and interreligious partners, friendships, so that when the Holy Spirit arrives we will have the door open and he can come in and transform us. So the next thing we must do is persevere. Perseverance is the virtue of the ecumenical life of the Church.

I don't think "too busy" is an acceptable reason. Too busy for a friendship? We all give priority to whatever we believe is a worthy avocation or preoccupation. The *Decree* will be read again, seriously, and inspire a new well-formed generation of ecumenists, whether or not that includes the clergy. The formation of that generation needs to begin ten years ago. A conversation needs to take place among bishops who can design a method of nurturing a culture of unity despite our

modern challenges, acknowledging openly and honestly where difficulties still lie after we have withdrawn all our anathemas and condemnations.

2. We must communicate better.

Our most recent goal in the Virginia LARCUM Conference as well as CADEIO Regional Meetings around the country is to catalogue the countless authentic interactions that are taking place between churches and religions on the local level. We've discovered that Reception needs to go *both ways*—the work of dialogues and judicatory leaders and theologians needs somehow to make it to the common awareness of the people of God in the pews—but the living, vibrant expression of ecumenism in relationships among churches and communities needs to be an inspiration also to those who lead, who may be unaware of what is already happening everywhere and all the time in the Body of Christ. The movement is very much alive in the homes and churches of the laity, in their marriages, in their food pantries and soup kitchens. Our work must be documented and clearly communicated so that people will see the activity and its fruitfulness. The state of our popularly, so-called "Ecumenical Winter" is perpetuated by many who don't realize the vast amount of ecumenical activity that is happening in clergy associations indoors and among those who serve in cold weather shelters everywhere.

3. We must trust that God has already begun the work long ago.

We recently celebrated the season of Advent and found joy—rejoicing—in the fact that the plan of God is already well underway, despite the darkness and tragedy of our world, our confusion and sin and suffering, scandal and genocide. "Rejoice! He is among you." The plan has begun long ago, even though we may not see visible proof of it yet. John the Baptist tells us about his cousin who has been here all his life, we just haven't seen him yet. We know on some level that although we suddenly saw God-made-Man in the flesh at Christmas,

he was in fact conceived at the Annunciation nine months before and the plan already had been unfolding toward fulfillment.

His plan began with his creation of our nature, and our re-creation in his Incarnation when what had become disordered by sin began the process of being re-ordered. What was divided by sin is in the process of finding unity in him. His solution to this Holy Order is clearly ecclesial in nature, and this communion or belonging to him is the work of the Holy Spirit and our rediscovery of our own identity as made and remade in him.

The Church is the sacrament of unity precisely because each of us is *a note* in that one improvisation of God's love. Only a note, but one required to complete the composition which he has already begun.

4. This is one last element that I believe is necessary to finish this conversation: Discussion of identity must reject any aspects of individualism.

Henri de Lubac, one of the theologians of the *Nouvelle Theologie* which was so influential in the formation of the mind of Vatican II, wrote of a kind of unity which has stayed with me for many years. In his book *Catholicism*, he speaks of a oneness with which God created mankind. Not as individuals did he create men, but as one creation he formed mankind and each of us participates in that unity of creation, a "natural unity" that is presupposed by the supernatural unity of the Mystical Body of Christ.

"So the Fathers of the Church, in their treatment of grace and salvation, kept constantly before them the Body of Christ, and in dealing with the creation were not content only to mention the formation of individuals, the first man and the first woman, but delighted to contemplate God creating humanity as a whole. "God," says St. Irenaeus, for example, "in the beginning of time plants the vine of the human race; he loved this

human race and purposed to pour out his Spirit upon it and to give it the adoption of sons." For Irenaeus again, as indeed for Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, for Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus, Hilary and others, the lost sheep of the Gospel that the Good Shepherd brings back to the fold is no other than the whole of human nature; its sorry state so moves the Word of God that he leaves the great flock of angels, as it were, to their own devices in order to go to its help.

"They seemed to witness its birth, to see it live, to grow, develop as a single being. With the first sin it was this being, whole and entire, which fell away, driven out of paradise. And when Christ at last appeared, coming as the one bridegroom, his bride, once again, was the whole human race."

He became Man, not a man. Because we are one, we are all touched by the sin of Adam (suddenly the doctrine of original sin and redemption makes sense), and blessedly, touched by the divinity of Christ and transfigured. We, all, are his image. We can't speak of mankind any more in the plural than we would think of three gods (Gregory of Nyssa). Literally, in the image of God are we made. Division is infidelity to this image in which we are made, it is sin. Ecumenism is healing.

Ecumenism seeks, as the first part of the *Decree* says, the restoration of this unity free from the errors of individualism, charting a course around the confusion of personal pieties and worship styles, between the mentality of the "sacred remnant" or the pluralism that all are saved, or indifferentism, which is so common today. Our life is so much more complicated today by an inconsistent understanding of morality which is defined by individuals whose truths and norms are opinion-based and in contradiction with one another, ecclesial body against ecclesial body. Today it might seem even that our churches are drifting apart faster than they are coming together. With corporate groups, individualism is still the sin of division and rails against what we know to be true.

Again, Fr. Tom Stransky in 1965:

"In God's plan of grace on our behalf, divided as we Christians are, the non-Catholic Communities *as such* have a meaningful, Christian role. They are not simply secular groups of individual Christians but Christian Communities in which means of grace are available to men and corporate worship is offered to God. For the dissident Christian the process of sharing in the new life of Christ does not take place *outside* his own Communion or *despite* it but *within* his own Communion and *by means of it* (pp. 26-27).

"...the structure of the individual Community remains incomplete and closed if the bishop stands alone and does not live in communion with the other bishops of different Churches, with and under the Bishop of Rome. The Church of Christ, then, is not a federation of ecclesiastical provinces but a Communion of local Churches, through which the entire Body of the Universal Church and each particular church achieve their growth in perfect harmony, each being open to the needs of others and sharing its own goods with others. The unity of the Church is thus based on the principle of "catholicity," the Communion of all Churches among themselves, and "apostolicity," *i.e.*, the episcopal principle."

I was struck by the opening prayer offered by one of the bishops at our State LARCUM Conference a couple of months ago. He paused. "Let us pray. Lord Jesus, you *are* the living bread. You are among us..." All of us have asked the Lord how can it be that we are not united by him, our living bread, unable as we are to receive that Bread of Communion together? No amount of stripping of plaster or forcing revival is going to make that happen. But hearts that turn to him, naturally one, can seek through holiness a transformation that only God can bring about. I go back to a prayer that we were taught to say as children when we were unable to go to Mass: "My savior, Jesus,

since I cannot now receive you under the sacramental veil, I beseech you, with a heart full of love and longing, to come spiritually into my soul and abide with me forever." Together, this could be the common prayer of the Church, and: "Jesus, our living bread, you are here among us. Help us to conform outwardly to the reality you have already given to us inwardly in the form of faith, hope, and love."

Many have said that our final recourse is spiritual ecumenism. Realizing that communion isn't something that we make that belongs to us but, rather, that we belong to God, we must be willing to set aside our self as individuals and acknowledge that it no longer we that live, but Christ who lives in us.

The *Decree on Ecumenism*, then, is the awakening to what we already know of ourselves, a call to commit ourselves to know the other. Only our knowledge of one another will reveal what we are *together*; otherwise we will simply continue to define clearly what we are as *apart*. We are called to be more than a network of confessional Churches in mutual recognition. Cardinal Kasper: "The Catholic understanding of ecumenism presupposes what already exists: the unity of the Catholic Church and partial communion with the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities in order, starting from this partial communion, to reach full communion (UUS 14) which includes unity in the faith, in the sacraments, and in the ecclesiastical ministry (LG 14, UR 2ff)."